

Tracking Desert Fox requires persistence

► Continued from L1

recreation destination replete with spas and ski hotels. Herringen appeared on the brochure's map, a village within Blaustein's town limits. It was easily reachable by light rail, no more than 15 minutes away.

My benefactor also sketched a crude map of sites associated with Rommel, both the town cemetery and a museum dedicated to the field marshal.

As my train entered the hamlet of Herringen, there didn't seem to be any sign of the drama of Rommel's final days. After a start in the wrong direction, I found a signpost pointing toward the *Erwin Rommel Straße*. After a lengthy walk down a rustic, wooded road, I found a large, walled home that had been the villa of the Rommel family during the war. A sign indicated who the occupants had been throughout the 20th century. Although the property seemed to be municipally owned, it was not open to the public.

It was to this house that Rommel returned to recuperate

after being wounded in the summer of 1944. On July 17, 1944, two British fighter planes caught Rommel's staff car near Linzlet, in Normandy, and strafed it with .50-caliber machine gun fire. The car somersaulted, killing the driver and inflicting serious head wounds to Rommel, effectively ending his participation in the Normandy campaign and subsequent Allied breakout.

Under suspicion

It was also here that the field marshal received word of the failure of the assassination plot to kill Hitler. A bomb placed in Hitler's East Prussian briefing room by Col. Claus Von Stauffenberg had managed only superficial damage and precipitated the arrest and interrogation of many of Rommel's colleagues. The subsequent investigation circumstantially implicated Rommel and added to Hitler's growing dissatisfaction with his former favorite.

Rommel's son, Manfred, the former vice mayor of Stuttgart, has written about the tension marking these final months. Rommel was

aware that he was under suspicion, especially when he noticed a nightly Gestapo presence near the entrance to the driveway. As I stood near the house, the warm sunlight, surrounding trees and bucolic silence made such a sinister presence seem impossible. There wasn't much else to see, as the house is secluded.

Down a nearby paved path I could see a church steeple, but when I got closer, it was clear that the church was built recently, with no cemetery, people or information.

A young woman with two small children stopped to help. Seeking Rommel's grave, I managed the phrase, "Bitte, Friedhof Erwin Rommel?" With limited English and sign language, she politely made it clear that she would take me there herself.

Back at the center of town, I discovered I'd given up a few hundred yards early. The woman led me to the entrance of the cemetery and pointed to the southwest corner. At the rear of the small, well-maintained burial ground, Erwin Rommel is buried next to his wife, Lucie, the marker shaped and painted like a large Iron Cross and carved out of wood. While there is no inscription, other than name and date of birth and death, there are several other memorial plaques in both German and English from military units, both German and Allied.

Unlocking the past

My guide's impromptu tour continued toward city hall. I'd asked about the Erwin Rommel Museum and I'd gotten another polite nod, and the unreasonable notion of a wrist turning a key in a lock. We pushed up a key there and continued on our way. After a few hundred yards, we came to an older building that seemed to serve several municipal functions. The key opened the wooden front door



Field Marshal Erwin Rommel is buried in a large Iron Cross and carved out of wood in an unsuccessful plot to

and a second door on the first floor of the building.

She left me to the solitude and exhibits detailing the life of one of the most prominent military figures in European history.

The museum consists of two large rooms containing numerous framed maps, photographs, newspaper articles and paintings. Glass cases contain the general's decorations and uniforms. One features the Iron Cross, cap and uniform worn during the French campaign of 1940. There is a plaster life mask and sand-colored Afrika Korps uniform and pith helmet. Another case contains Rommel's *Pour le Mérite*, the German equivalent of the Medal of Honor. Rommel viewed it as a company commander in World War I, when his unit captured 5,000 Italian troops in a single day.

There is also an extensive archive of rare books about the war in North Africa and Europe and volumes on other topics and about individuals from Rommel's time period. Judging from the guest book, the museum doesn't receive many visitors, perhaps a couple a month, seemingly of the academic or military variety. I signed the book and pushed up a roughly monographed biography, chronology and map of Herringen with additional points of interest. I locked up the building and returned the key to city hall.

Unfortunately, the map was

IF YOU GO

► **Getting there:** Ulm is on the Stuttgart-Munich train line, about an hour from Munich. From there, Herringen is about 15 minutes on a local shuttle train that leaves frequently from Ulm's main train station, Richtung Blaubeuren (Direction Blaubeuren). At Herringen's train station, follow the main street to the right to the town cemetery, which will place you in the vicinity of the Rathaus (city hall), location of the key to the Rommelstraße, accessible during office hours. The Rommel villa and Gedenkhof Rommel are both on the Erwin Rommel Straße street directly across from the cemetery.



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